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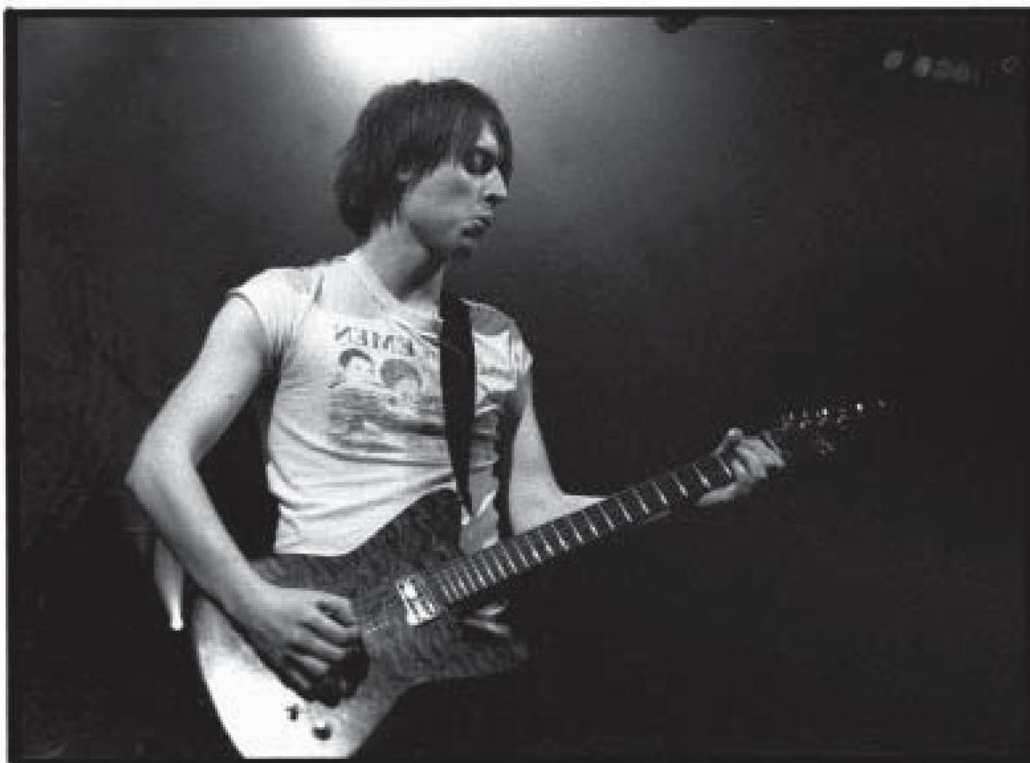


THE VINES

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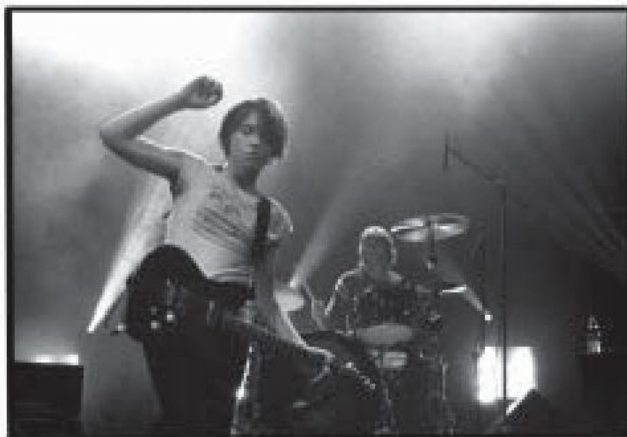


Story: Monica Cady • Photos: Austen Mikulka

The eternal question: Jessica Simpson - genuinely stupid, or an act? The same trueness of character has been asked of the Vines lead singer Craig Nicholls, who has been accused of being a lot of things - insane, nervous, agitated, peculiar, paranoid, a pothead and much more. That's not to say these descriptions of Nicholls arise without extensive proof.

The 27-year-old garage rock punk has had his share of violent on-stage acts and run-ins with countless journalists, who are quick to detail all of his idiosyncrasies, i.e. how Nicholls carries a bong in his pocket 24-7, drinks Red Bull like water, doesn't bathe, has nervous tics and an inability to focus on conversations. It would seem that a psychotic act this consistent, both on and off camera, would be hard to fake. Nicholls appears such a likely candidate for a straitjacket that his behavior gets talked about more than the music he makes with the Vines.

That's no surprise really. In the media business, journalists abide by some unsaid rule that being cruel and critical furthers their careers more than the so-called promo stories. Journalists often probe to find the nitty-gritty ugliness of their subjects to make stories more interesting and sellable. In the case of the Vines - with their self-destruct sound and unstable lead singer - they were an easy target for the fame-seeking journo.



fact, many fans hoping for the next Nirvana may have met great disappointment to discover that the debut 2002 LP *Highly Evolved*, was as equally loaded with angst rock roars as chill out bliss.

As I speak with Rosser, the Vines' new drummer (the previous drummer David Olliffe suffered a mental breakdown), he describes the different audience reactions. "In the U.S., we'll be playing and then when we bring out the acoustic guitars, people are like, *what?* They don't really get that part. They just want the loud stuff all the time."

Rosser agrees that the media have become obsessed with Nicholls crazy talk, but he shrugs it off and seems untouched by the matter. "Craig has just gotten fed up with talking to journalists all together these days. I think he's sick of it. I guess that's probably why you're talking to me today," he says light-heartedly and laughs. We both know he's right. "Craig is just a really shy guy," he adds. But I'm not buying that last part.

During the Aussie Invasion Tour at Atlanta, Georgia's Roxy, Nicholls is wild with the same zany energy seen in his music videos. His wide-open mouth wobbles side-to-side through drawn-out screams, eyes roll back in his head, and his arms aimlessly meander through the air between guitar riffs. He repeatedly bangs his head into the

microphone, boyishly giggles, and then babbles something unintelligible about taking acid and mushrooms.

Nicholls knocks over his microphone stand, literally, every three seconds. A discouraged stagehand rushes to upright the mic, which is inevitably flung down again. The theater's front row fans are easily at risk of being hit - with *anything*. The band members, aware of his commonly spastic behavior, keep one eye on their work, and another on Nicholls.

The Vines are not necessarily complaining about their mad frontman reputation, but the main loss may be that their music becomes an after-thought among audiences. Admittedly, it's rather difficult to totally dismiss the lunacy of Nicholls, who is, after all, the creative singer-songwriter behind the group (named after his accountant father's '60s band, the Vynes). The Vines (Patrick Matthews, bass; Ryan Griffiths, guitar; and Hamish Rosser, drums) are lead by this supposed maniac, who just happens to be an artistic wonder contained by a volatile persona.

After their 2002 hit "Get Free" exploded worldwide, listeners across the globe wanted to know who this grunge savior was. Coming from Australia gave the band an international advantage - with strong fan bases in the U.K. and other parts of Europe. To this day, the guys claim that when compared to U.K. crowds, American audiences still don't quiet grasp what they are about - that they are not strictly loud and rough. In

He runs into the drum set a few times, and even slams his guitar onto the floor. The guitar neck is completely separated from its body, and the same tech guy runs to savage the ruined equipment. The sold-out crowd exchange smirks among themselves. At times, it seems we are more like observers at an insane asylum's visiting hour than a rock concert. Nicholls downs a can of Red Bull and goes into another delirious trance. (He has been known to combine drinking Red Bull with smoking lots of pot.)

Though Nicholls looked a befuddled mess (His white cap-sleeve T-shirt was inside out, with a stain on the right shoulder.), his musical performance was expressive, bold and mesmerizing. As we watched, I think all of us in the audience wanted to feel the power of that enchanting place where Nicholls' mind resides. And indeed, he was in another place. This very performance was in Nicholls' own dimension – audience or not – he was channeling his songs and dancing as if no one was watching. According to Matthews, this escape from reality is what the band values most – the ability to be artists who can defy rules of normal behavior.

At one point, Nicholls dropkicked a half-empty water bottle into the spectators. It sailed through the crowd with bullet force, but no one complained or shouted "Fuck You!" Maybe we were all afraid to agitate the madman. But mostly, we were amazed by the fascinating effect the Vines had on the scene. The loud songs were full of a fury that is being neglected by the latest new-wave '80s flashback bands. And the ballads were subdued and easy, but still buzzed with a heady, passionate life of their own.

While the Nicholls mishaps on stage kept us asking "*What next?*" – this feeling would have grown tiresome were it not for their unquestionable rock'n'roll display. The set list fluctuated from peaceful to reckless, and was eagerly accepted by the on-lookers, who were so enamored that they didn't even move to mosh when "Get Free" blared from the speakers. Instead, they stared at the sight on stage with utter reverence and awe. Like a schizophrenic patient, Nicholls transformed from a hippy earth-lover to a fuck-the-world punk. This sound alteration from calm to panic, mimics the Vines 2004 release *Winning Days* – a lazy '60s daydream with '90s rock spirit.

Critics have called *Winning Days*, a repeat of *Highly Evolved*. Rosser explains, "Most of the songs on the new album are old. I mean, we have been playing them live already. We just had to put them on an album." Rosser says the band really shines in the studio. He admits to being overwhelmed by the talent Nicholls displayed while creating the record. "Craig is just incredible in the studio – the harmonizations he had were just magical, really. I think if he had his way, he'd be in the studio all the time." Live, Nicholls shrieks and contorts words into utter nonsense. On the album, you can actually comprehend the lyrics, which are quiet frank about his state of mind. "Look through me because I am transparent/ ... I'm succeeding to speak like I'm fucking mad/ Looking at the autumn shade/ you are white and I am grey," Nicholls calmly coos on the abstract "Autumn Shade II." In comparison to heated, ruthless tracks like "Ride"



and "Animal Machine," the Black Crowes flavored "Sun Child" delivers to us a delicate, wistful young dreamer. Songs like these prove Nicholls has an awareness of soulful things. With a slightly country-western easiness he sweetly sings, "Sun child/ You're a sun child/ Awoken by the spirit of the day/ Will I grow wild/ Speaking so mild." Words are usually less important than the feeling of the melodies for Nicholls. The melodic pieces range from Beach Boys flair to Beatles sensations. He describes "She's Got Something to Say" as sounding "like surfing feels." Whereas, he calls "Rainfall," "an innocent sound in an innocent song."

When asked what the band had rather read about (other than Nicholls' behavior), Rosser laughs. "Oh, I don't know ... I wish people would focus on what brand of jeans we wear. I mean that's what's important, right?" It's obvious I'm not getting a straight answer out of this jovial guy. (Although,

I must admit, I found it odd that Nicholls was sporting jeans without pockets – a rather girly style - at his Atlanta gig.)

Rosser is such a comic that he can't even give me a profound insight into his own character. He did reveal that he loves cooking, swimming and beer. Drinking beer is what he does when not working with music. "I prefer the lager beers," he says, "You know, Sam Adams, Sierra Nevada ... I miss not having a kitchen on tour. I get tired of eating out all the time." American restaurants are too franchise-oriented in his opinion.

Rosser's also a bit of a jock with a fondness for cricket – but who would ever write anything about that when Nicholls is breaking journalists' tape recorders and starting fist fights with bandmates? Rosser continues providing half-hearted, silly responses by saying things like, "*Winning Days* is different from the first album, because there are different songs – and a new drummer."

For now, these are the kinds of exchanges we music journos can expect from the Vines. The media has thoroughly exposed the derangement of Craig Nicholls to the point that he has had enough of the whole discussion. (He has been known to lock himself in bathrooms for hours to avoid interviews.)

Like Jessica Simpson, maybe it shouldn't matter to America if Craig Nicholls is truly fucked up or not. And yes, he also has those same Simpson-like celebrity quotes in national magazines. *Rolling Stone* recently quoted the guy saying, "Maybe [the world] would be better if people didn't hate so much and kill animals. At the same time, it's like whatever. It's just a planet." Funny, coming from a singer who closes his second album with an environmentalist anthem "Fuck the World" ("Fuck the fields and destroy the ocean/ ... Don't be supreme/ Don't fuck up fuck the world"). Nicholls confesses that the message of the song is not really clear, but "hopefully everything is about the future." So, he may not be the most obvious with his intentions and messages. At the very least Nicholls is entertaining, and isn't that what the U.S. audiences value most anyway? Although, he claims he doesn't care if people are entertained by his performances.

Instead of making Nicholls the irrational one, perhaps we could try to get inside his world of amnesia and winning days – forgetting our "real" world for a moment to experience his fool's paradise. (I know at the Roxy we wanted to. It seems like one hell of a place.) In fact, our invitation to do so comes within the first track of *Winning Days*. Nicholls pleads, insists, "Ride with me!/ Ride with me!" And conceivably, that's exactly what we should be doing.

